

AN
ADDRESS TO THE PUBLIC
ON THE
PROPRIETY OF MIDWIVES,
INSTEAD OF
SURGEONS,
PRACTISING
MIDWIFERY.

"Nothing ought to be held laudable or becoming, but what nature itself should prompt us to think so."

Steele.—Spectator, Vol. I. No. 6.

THIRD EDITION, WITH A POSTSCRIPT.

PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR:
AND SOLD BY LONGMAN, REES & CO. LONDON;
ROBINSON AND BENT, MANCHESTER;
G. & J. ROBINSON, LIVERPOOL; J. & J. HADDOCK, WARRINGTON;
AND MAY BE HAD OF ALL BOOKSELLERS.

1826.

PREFACE.

THE few succeeding pages were at first intended for insertion in a daily London evening newspaper, of the first respectability, and most extensive circulation; and on applying for the purpose, the writer received, through the medium of that paper, this reply:—
“ *We entirely concur* with our W——ton correspondent upon the subject of his letter: but it is one that can hardly be discussed with propriety in the columns of a newspaper.” In giving publicity to his sentiments, the writer is not actuated by a desire of gratifying self-vanity in the publication of a doctrine, which, however just, may be considered in the present age almost novel as a publicly and openly admitted principle; nor is it his intention to provoke medical disputation on a point, which natural delicacy and charity require to be left to the determination of the impartial portion of the public individually, and especially to the retired feelings of the fair sex. As we are enjoined, in the exercise of our moral duties, to be active in doing good, besides refraining from the commission of unjustifiable harm, the writer, who is a married man, is solely urged, in this short address, by a sincere wish to deter what

must be considered a gross abuse, and to recommend innocent means of alleviating one of the many distresses, to which human life is exposed, in this fleeting and probationary state of existence.

In this tract the writer has adopted precisely the form of words, which were intended to have first appeared in the public press. In thus continuing the epistolary style, he trusts, that he shall not be charged with egotism ; having preferred that style only on account of its appearing to him to be freest from restraint, and in the present case of a public appeal, best calculated to aid his humble, yet earnest efforts, to awaken the attention of the public to the importance of the subject, and to the propriety of the following remarks.

POSTSCRIPT.

THAT the general reader may enter more fully than he otherwise could into a sense of the force and propriety of the sentiments and remarks expressed in the succeeding tract, it is quite requisite to notice the following general fact, which the necessity of understanding will at once justify an allusion to here. It is common with many practitioners, besides the usual attention, to interfere in an early stage of even a natural labour, and occasionally afterwards, for the real or seeming purposes of ascertaining the progress made, or what length of time the practitioner may give to the pursuit of other professional avocations before assistance will become requisite. The propriety or impropriety of any interference must depend in every case on the symptoms indicated, or the result of inquiry at the time, as to whether or not they induce a reasonable supposition that the labour is so far advanced as to render some (be it more or less) assistance of the practitioner necessary. That by any human device the conduct of medical men could be universally and permanently restricted to a proper course in this respect is absolutely impossible. The only corrective to

misconduct in this way, unless surgeons were discouraged from practising midwifery, would be a disclosure of a nature highly repugnant to the feelings of delicacy in the individual female (especially if young) whose modesty and general propriety of demeanour might intitle her to credit: such a disclosure would therefore rarely if ever come before the public; and even if it did, and however well founded, it would not circulate far—would be liable to partial contradiction, disbelief, discountenance, suppression, or misconstruction, and would generally make only a slight impression on persons unaffected by it. Thus, besides the almost universally insurmountable and unblameable aversion to making such a public disclosure, for the sake of correction and reformation, it would be impossible for it when made to produce a general and lasting sensation in the community. This aversion to disclose, and impossibility of the disclosure becoming effectual, considered with reference to the natural forwardness peculiar to the male sex, argues strongly in favour of midwives, and against surgeons practising midwifery.—The reader will not, however, infer, that any one of the sentiments or remarks expressed in the succeeding tract rests only on the objection to the present practice, proceeding from what is here stated: they are more than sufficiently founded on the practice of midwifery by surgeons in every case, and under any cir-

stances, yet certainly their importance is augmented by the frequent aggravation of the universally applying objections to such practice arising from what has just been explained.

The author has met with a plausible objection raised to the reformation proposed in the succeeding pages by some in the medical profession ; namely, that a female practitioner would not have nerve sufficient to assist alone in difficult cases. The truth simply is, that such cases rarely happen even before a surgeon, and would still more rarely occur before a midwife, and that when they do happen, skill and experience will inspire confidence in the practice of one sex, as much as in that of the other. In former times midwives alone practised midwifery. The author has never met with any thing in print attempting to confute his doctrine, notwithstanding his tract first appeared before the public nearly six months since. He has indeed seen a merely satirical effusion, directed against the work, in a new weekly publication, chiefly circulated in his own neighbourhood. A course of lectures on the practice of midwifery has lately been delivered in Manchester to female students exclusively, by Mr. Radford, one of the lecturers to the Lying-in Hospital in London, which, the author is informed, will be repeated there. It is highly requisite that similar lectures should be given in

like manner in the metropolis; and it would be very desirable to have an institution permanently established there for the instruction in the practice of midwifery of female students exclusively. Such a measure would be best effected through the influence of persons in a high station. Many respectable and well educated young females would find the profession of midwifery, worthy their study and practice. An attentive perusal of some modern and able treatise on the practice of midwifery, and an attendance at lectures on this subject will both be requisite for these purposes. From the author's situation, his humble yet earnest exertions are necessarily confined almost exclusively to the publication and distribution of his tract. It is for every individual in society approving of its general purposes, to contribute his own aid and influence in promoting them. With all due respect to which the members of the medical profession may be fairly entitled, while acting in their proper sphere, the author hopes and trusts that a free and enlightened British public will not allow the united and persevering influence, and the insinuating address of medical men, to stifle the cause of decency and good taste, of humanity and virtue.

APRIL, 1826.

REMARKS ON THE PRESENT PRACTICE OF MIDWIFERY.

TO THE EDITOR,

SIR,—It is an incontrovertible principle, that mere custom, however ancient and prevalent, ought to be suppressed, where it is intrinsically bad. In offering a few remarks on the impropriety of surgeons attending females at their accouchements, I trust to your liberality of sentiment in giving them publicity, through the medium of your extensively circulated columns; convinced that your regard for the public welfare, and more particularly in this case for the protection of the British fair, will render you superior to the animadversions of a phalanx of men, who are united by their profession in one common interest to support the present accustomed practice of midwifery. In thus acting, Sir, you will not disparage, nor do I wish to cast any censure on their other professional avocations. In our nation, medical men rarely interfered in accouchements till within the last seventy or eighty years. Through the facility afforded to young men in later years of instruction in surgery, and particularly through the numerous anatomical lectures, and lectures on midwifery at the same time provided for their improvement, and also through the great advances

lately made in the science of midwifery, and through the surprisingly increased number of surgeons, and of physicians who practice as such, the ancient and salutary practice of midwives has, by reason of their not having kept equal pace in improvement, become almost extinct, except amongst many of the lowest ranks of society. The great impropriety of this change I will proceed to shew, and should have felt surprised that it has not been before checked, could not its continuance have been attributed to the causes just before stated, to the consequent dread of trusting to merely practical knowledge, where scientific knowledge might be so readily employed, and to the delicacy which has unfortunately operated to silence complaint in the fair sex.

It will be well to premise that none of the following observations are meant to be applicable to those females, whose habits or dispositions render them in a great measure insensible to decency, nor to husbands whose affections have been seared by gross licentiousness in their wives ; nor can any of them be expected to apply with proper force to those men whose matrimonial unions have been merely political, nor where, through inveterate domestic strife, their conjugal affections have subsided.

It is unquestionably *indelicate* and *unnatural* for a *surgeon* to assist at a child-birth, and

more especially as many in the profession are averse to the presence of the husband on such occasions. Surely as far as delicacy is concerned, the presence of the latter, when a surgeon is present, is more congenial to the feelings of the wife, and probably of the husband.* Custom may, to a certain extent, reconcile what would otherwise be a gross outrage on the feelings ; but I appeal, Sir, to the candour of the generality of your readers, both single and married, whether a professional degree, conferred only by a human institution, can on the occasion alluded to efface the natural restraints of female delicacy, and thus subvert the order of nature, although a surgeon may be of a good moral character, and ever so much respected ; whether it is not natural for both husband and wife to have a secret and lasting repugnance to the practice which I am censuring, however a sense of delicacy may stifle the expression to others of their individual sentiments, or when solicited, even sometimes urge a disavowal of them. Most assuredly such a practice may tend in a certain degree to weaken in a female that rational self-respect, which every modest wife feels a laudable pride in preserving, and every affectionate husband a pleasure in sup-

* The statement and most of the remarks contained in the first paragraph of the Postscript, page 5, are especially applicable here.

porting. I do not mean to insinuate that the moral feeling is thus necessarily abandoned, in part or altogether, but certainly in weak minds, it may be more or less endangered by this infringement on self-respect. The truth is, the virtuous and affectionate wife naturally views and reflects on the personal liberties of any other man than her husband, though for a purpose sanctioned by custom, with detestation and horror; and surely on such an occasion as that which forms the present subject beyond most others, at such a moment, the female mind ought not to be unnecessarily agitated or depressed.

The objections to a surgeon's attendance on such occasions do not end here. The arguments hitherto adduced are chiefly applicable to both sexes, but the lamentable consequences to females of their mental feelings in such cases come next under consideration. Every one knows that the sympathy between the mind and the body may be exemplified in numerous ways, and it is frequently instanced on the occasions which lead to the present subject. It is an undeniable fact, that the presence and interference of a surgeon during child-birth operate on the female mind by the dread and repugnance arising from a sense of delicacy, so as generally to throw back the labour, and consequently to render it lingering; especially with

regard to young females, whose first case, if no unfavourable causes supervene in others, is, on this account, most critical during the delivery. Even the expected approach of a surgeon will sometimes produce a like effect. In such cases surgeons may be truly said to contribute to the occasional necessity for artificial aid. Now, Sir, instead of unnecessarily commenting on these indisputable facts, and on the obviously increased pain and debility, and sometimes difficult and unnatural labours, lasting complaints, or even fatal consequences, which are thus superinduced to the female sex, I will, with deference to the public opinion, suggest, what appears to me the best manner of presently and permanently removing these additional evils.

Before doing this, I cannot forbear adverting in this public communication to the deplorable and tragical end of our late amiable and deservedly lamented Princess Charlotte. Without discussing the immediate physical cause of this national calamity, and without the slightest intention of reflecting in the least degree on those who had the preparatory direction in her lingering and fatal accouchement, whom I firmly believe to have acted, though under the bias of an evil custom, to the best of their information and power, I will nevertheless venture to affirm, that if the assistance of a skilful

and experienced midwife had been substituted for that of the late unfortunate Sir Richard Croft, her Royal Highness would, at least, have had a better chance of a successful issue. If any difficulty in the birth had still prevailed, it would certainly not have been aggravated by that natural revolt of mind and body, which, it is to be strongly suspected, her delicate sensibility would cause her to sustain, under actual circumstances.

In *almost all* child-births, and especially where a surgeon is not present, as is often the case with the lower orders of society, and is the case with nearly all such in Wales, the trifling assistance of a *country midwife* is amply sufficient. Those females living remote from the metropolis, and who cannot conveniently bear the expense of having a midwife from town, scientifically acquainted with her profession, would do well to have a common experienced midwife in the first instance, who would be readily found in the country ; and if the labour should prove difficult, a surgeon might then be called in ; and if it were thought more satisfactory, he might be previously appointed to be near at hand.

It is much to be wished that there were to be found beyond the precincts of the metropolis, respectable midwives, who had studied their profession scientifically, and had duly at-

tended the lectures which are so frequently given in midwifery. Will any one be so absurd as to maintain, that the female mind is not capacitated for such a study ? On the contrary, by principally directing their studies to this particular science, their skill in midwifery would generally be superior to that of surgeons. If midwives possessed scientific knowledge and experience in their profession, they would be confided in and encouraged amongst the higher orders of society, and their exertions could not fail to be amply rewarded. I cannot conceive any objection to such a plan, except as it clashes with the interests of the medical profession ; but surely the public welfare ought to be preferred before the exclusive and baneful advantage of any particular set of men. It would be desirable if there were lectures on midwifery instituted for the exclusive attendance of female students ; but if such a step cannot be conveniently and speedily effected, let not female students hesitate to attend other lectures on the subject. Let them pursue their laudable course with firmness and constancy, reflecting at the same time, that whatever trifling disagreeableness there may at first view seem in the pursuit, they will thus be advancing to extinguish great and lasting evils affecting their own sex, and may confidently look forward to an ample pecuniary recompence. Each of them will thus,

in a short time, have it in her power, probably on numerous occasions, for many years of an active life, to advance the honour of her sex ; to prevent an indelicacy, as gross as it is unnatural ; to prevent an infringement on that rational self-respect which contributes to render women amiable in the eyes of the good and wise of the other sex ; and to prevent the ill consequences to female health, which generally in a greater or less degree are superinduced by the present practice of midwifery.

The sentiments I have expressed are, from the nature of the subject, open to the shafts of silly ridicule, and have to combat with the prejudice of inveterate habit, and the sophistry, mistatements, and sneers of petty interest ; but I am so thoroughly convinced of their propriety, that I confidently trust them to the consideration of the candid reader, without intending to reply to any fallacious arguments, that may hereafter be opposed to them. The subject is unquestionably of great importance, and I wish that I could have expressed the foregoing sentiments with correspondent energy.

Yours, &c.

PROPRIETAS.

